

Chapter 1

Twice Born

In the beginning galaxies were nothing but swirling tempests, stars had scarcely flickered the first lights upon the virgin dark, and worlds were cast about like molten marbles that tumbled carelessly off into the void or settled about some other celestial body. Around those oases of light some pebbles remained whole long enough to cool, and form an atmosphere. Before long the first rains came and washed the fiery mountainsides of their ash, rinsed clean igneous stones that had never known moisture before, and created searing pools of every chemical description.

With heat and some time, those organic compounds in this primal slurry separated, recombined, and eventually sequenced into life. Two lives, to be exact, came together from the broth as twin souls - a brother and a sister. Before them there had been a few clumps of organic mush across the stars that seemed to resemble life, and there were tiny husks of proteins that shot about with a simple strand of genetic code tucked within, but these two had something not yet seen in this burgeoning cosmos, souls. They swam together from one end of the pool, to the other, their flagella remaining just within reach of one another at all times, the occasional cloud of sulfur or nitric acid in the water giving them a spook. After a short time the two felt a strange sensation, as a seem appeared down their centers and they each spawned another copy of themselves - with but the tiniest change to their DNA. The two swum happily together as their spawn fluttered off into the sightless pool. Their sole genetic task accomplished, the two then expired in each other's embrace.

Suddenly their world of water and minerals was replaced by an endless nothingness. They felt no flowing currents, no heat, no chemical signals, not even each other, all either of them felt was the Void. Neither had ever possessed eyes, yet now they saw - if only to witness the infinity before them. They had never felt anything but basic chemical signals, yet now they both were beset with a chilling sensation, and knowledge for which they had no reckoning. The brother trembled and looked for his sister, groping in the endless dark for some sign of the only one he had ever known, but found nothing.

The sister looked around and saw two lights - one full and radiant, the other a misty white - but not a sign of her only companion. In life they had been tiny nothings, but now they stood bare before the darkness of creation itself, and most terrifyingly of all, they did so alone.

They were both terrified, both alone, and both transfixed upon these two immaculate lights: one far off in the distance hummed with a milky golden glow that wisped off into etheric strands, while the other held a burning heart that pulsed with life and energy. The brother saw the two lights, and knew that the one of ether and peace was his destined point. So he chose to embrace the way of things, and walked stalwart toward that distant glow. As he walked through the Void he forged a path with each formless step, creating a way for those mortals that follow them into death to be able to find peace in eternity. Amongst the endless hum of nothing, and the hiss of a path being carved in light, one could hear a soft pitter out in the dark; a cry of shattering loss, of a companion cast to the oceans of time never to see their only love again. But what could he do? She was lost out there in the Void, and all he could do is hope she would find a path to the same light.

The Sister looked toward the glow, and wept as she witnessed her brother leave her for such hollow radiance. But even as she watched her brother fade into the light she felt nothing for the pale and formless spec that claimed him. Its ephemeral whisps and timeless glow seemed so far removed from everything she knew and held dear, so instead of following him she looked back. When she peered toward the second light she saw exactly what she had so desperately hoped to see, her home. But it was encapsulated, like a smooth fractal suspended in the inky black. All thoughts seemed to fall away from her in that moment as she bore witness to the beauty of creation itself; a masterwork of form and beauty beyond compare. The timeborne works of all there is and was, blossomed into life before her. A universe, her home, laid bare to witness, had suddenly enraptured every part of her soul.

With some effort she was able to look within the little fractal, peer to specific points and bring them into focus. Wreathed about a searing white present was a molten, flowing tapestry of newly written histories. She saw the progress of eons through the glistening mote and bore witness to the writing of the ages from her lonesome watch.

Her home had changed so much following her death. Mountains sprung up from fiery hills, cooled, and were stained with snowy caps. Water trickled from the clouds of her home world and made oceans that swallowed up the land. She peered to other galaxies, into other solar systems, and found more life on more worlds full of changing lands, and pooling oceans. What fascinated her most of all, more than the booming stars, the icy nebulae, or the seas of astral curiosities, was how far life had come since her short time among them.

Cells joined and formed colonial organisms in bacterial ooze, and those soon went on to eat and grow and become true complex life. Organisms blossomed into endless twistings of psychedelic morphology - branching into trillions of ecosystems across a billion-billion stars. Little blooming things that grew from the earth and spread their arms to the skies above, were the first to colonize the land; many worlds quickly turned from bare stones, to lush gardens and rolling fields of simple plants. Eventually, when toxic skies were made breathable, some denizens of the seas braved the crushing shores, and pushed against gravity's might to take the first steps onto dry land.

The physical, oh how it intoxicated her with its beautiful, infinite, complexity. So much majesty expressed in endless combinations on countless worlds for her to bask before. The ether was so sterile, so bendable and formless - a fickle, wispy thing; not her home. Every life held endless variables and complexities within and without their awareness - with each one being as impactful as the last. An unbending reality of cold, hard truth, that grew and changed in an immaculate sorting of chaos that made the symphony of creation. Then she felt a gnawing hollow pit, form deep, deep within her soul, for she knew she would remain but a spectator to her beloved home till the end of days; no amount of cherishment would change that.

She loved her home, she loved it more than anything in creation, and every instant she spent in that utterly lonesome abyss was occupied by her thoughts to return there. She could walk to the light, like her brother did, but she would not, she could not. Oh, how she did love her brother though, and she longed to hold hands with him and swim without a care as they did so long ago. But her caring for this mote, her home, the universe she had known, outweighed all else. Though, in the depths of her she knew that it was by no act of love that she stayed her feet.

Her continuance in this place was an exercise in futility, and all that was to be gained by it was a deepening of her pain. But still she watched, year after year, decade upon decade, millennia and eons written into the scrolls of history for her to witness. Until one day she asked a question. Why?

Why was she here? Why was she able to see her home, but not go back? When she first arrived she felt bare, stripped down to her most naked self and placed within a crushing blaze that reamed through each facet of her soul. After that passed she felt nothing, but she suddenly knew everything. Every query, every mystery of life and its endless complexity, was suddenly made clear to her. She felt different - solid - as though made implacable and eternal in an etheric shell. "But, why?"

The Void is a great contradiction. It is an absolute abyss that is utterly full. It is the truest nothingness which holds all things. It is formless infinity to birth and swallow all time. An utter oblivion that stands as the totality and sum of creation. But perhaps most intriguing of all, it is of some will that is beyond which any mind of flesh or either could grasp. Taciturn in the extreme, it seldom shifts reality outside its acts of creation, or judgment of those who enter its abyss. When the Void is made to cast judgment upon a soul it selects one of two outcomes: Shred them to nothingness so that their energy may be used to create the new. Or, if a soul is seen as a make of true brilliance, born of unbound potential, they are ordained with the boons and burdens of the worthy.

Any who pass from the cradling yolk of their universe shall face the judgment of the Void, and to those it deems worthy it bestows great gifts: complete knowledge of creations workings. The Void pulls back the mysteries of the cosmos, and lays bare all its machinations to bestow an utter understanding of creation. Each string of the cosmos' symphony shall become brilliantly clear, and with their melody one shall be shaped with the very powers of creation itself. The Void takes hold of the flesh and soul of its Worthy and shapes them in ways reflective of some grander thing. It leaves within them, some part great or small, a piece of itself, and makes of these Worthy timeless and ancient beings; those ordained to exist past the death of thought and all things.

But to a soul alone in the abyss, what use is such power? What good is knowledge without a world in which to apply it? What good were these gifts of strength and longevity when she was trapped in nothingness? Was this all some cruel joke? Some game of a twisted silent god that would laugh at her suffering, drink deep her longing

and sorrow like sweet nectar for all time? And what a rich brew it would be, as she was forced to watch the thing she cared for above all else slowly wither and die. What a perfectly twisted joke it would be too. For she would know so intimately how the ravages of entropy and decay would tear her home apart. No stone, however stalwart, no mountain, however high, would stand forever. She knew how everything would rot and crumble into dust, before sputtering back into the endless black. Sorrow, hate, anger, frustration, drowned every part of her tiny soul. Then, like refuse and rot combusting beneath its own heat and choking mass, her spirit came alight with a roaring passion to not only return home, but to save it.

Her gifts, her power, meant nothing here. These ethereal things, the Void, the light, this endless energy she swam about in, and those distant lights off in the abyss, she could not care less about them. Every part of her screamed for home, and she would use the strength of this sick god to return there.

She could see the bounds of her universe, knew its form and function perfectly - she realized it would only take an act of might to slip to the other side. Perhaps she had been wrong, perhaps she had simply been blinded by depth of her peril - the grandeur of her charge - and became lost amongst despair, when the strength to prevail already lay within her. *What good is any of it?* She thought. *And even if I could return home, I'd only be there to watch it die.*

The pit in her soul was as swallowing as the darkness about her, and for eons she could only watch, consumed in dread and despair at the thought of that slow, inevitable, end. She saw the blooming of garden worlds. She watched through the ages as cultures and their great works rose from the dust. She witnessed the birth of systems across a billion galaxies, that spanned such distances it would fracture the mind. But what held her soul and every waking thought like a biting vice, was the knowledge that all of it would one day just end - leaving nothing but memories and empty space.

She watched animals and peoples eat, stars burn their cosmic fuel, and singularities consume and obliterate all in their path; and the only thing she could feel was disdain. Every dig, every bite, every birth, every burning creeping moment broke away another piece of her home. Over the eons she watched a million-billion souls leave on her brother's path of that ethereal light. After some time she came to curse each and every one - each taking their piece and then leaving the rest to rot once they were done.

Yet there she remained, immortal and helpless against entropy's endless ravaging of her home. What good was strength, without something to push? What good was light, in a world with nothing for it to shine upon? What good was knowledge, without something to apply it to? What good were the Worthy?

It is said that time is the enemy of all things, the apex predator to creation, but this is not true. Without time, all things would exist locked as they are; never to grow, never to change, never to evolve into the breadth of wondrous things we see all about us - and she knew this. Time passed in her brother's new home, just differently - strangely. But things there are boundless, ageless, shaped by consciousness and the will of those souls that reside there; without time's flow even such unbound beings would be locked in a sterile purgatory. Time is how all things are measured, how all things become knowable, how all things become real. No, time was not her nemesis - the source of her woes - that would be entropy.

The inevitable tendency of material things to decay, the destiny of all physical reality to perpetually devolve into chaos until the end of days - that is entropy. Like some Faustian bargain with the divine, the physical must pay an ultimate price for its form in oblivion.

But, what if it didn't? Perhaps that was the reason for her power. The reason for her gifts, for everything.

Suddenly it all became so crystal clear in her mind. That was it, the purpose of the worthy. The Void granted its chosen their boons so that they may save its great works from their fate.

For what grander purpose could there be?

After thorough contemplation, some flexing of her etheric muscles, and a livening of her spirit, she knew it. She knew she could do it - she could save her home. Though it would require a truly radical change, she was certain of that; not a thing could decay nor grow nor be born nor live - at least, not as they do now. Even atoms themselves would need to be stabilized, crystalized, and made such that they would persist through all time. She would freeze the hearts of stars and enter them into a beautiful stasis. She would halt the consumption of life forever, and hold each as a beautiful gem to be treasured for eternity. She would not stand by and see her home die. No, she would cease this march to oblivion - she would slay entropy itself.

But no amount of ambition or power would mean anything in her current state - she would need a new body. So she set about attempting a return to the physical world, poking and prodding at the glistening, unknowable veil that separated her little fractal from the howling abyss. The barrier was a strange bulwark of intertwined energies projecting into the void in an ever reaching tide, which grew, but did not expand. That siren light and her home were truly so much alike, almost as though mirrored - perfect copies yet utterly opposite. As she pressed back into her home she could see him in the distant light of that other place - a guardian and guide for all the souls that joined him there - and she smiled for him.

She pried and slivered, wormed and tunneled her way through the tangling web of light that had kept her out till finally she saw it. At long last... home. But as quickly as the stars and planets came into view, they went screaming back. The next sight she beheld was that same one she had grown so accustomed to - a little fractal mote held in her shapeless hands.

She tried time and again to re-enter her home, but each ended as the last, with her being ripped back to the Void in an instant. Her very existence in the physical universe without a body to inhabit was unnatural and impossible. So, logically she would need to procure a new body - one far greater than the tiny vessel she had once been born to.

In her ages of watching she had seen life's growth across time. She saw its development through uncounted years, and knew every facet of its workings perfectly. Life had changed so much since her time. All the way from simple cells in primordial pools - to thinking, reasoning beings that had taken to the stars. So many souls, so many bodies. She hoped that perhaps across time there would be one without the other; a body born without a soul, or a soul sent wandering from its still living flesh. But to her dismay no such instance had ever occurred in her millenia of watching, and therefore likely never would. If happenstance and fortune would not bear her an opportunity, she would simply have to make her own.

Over the eons she had seen countless chemical hellscapes turn into hotbeds of life, now all she required was one for herself. She wanted one with particular qualities: dense cloud cover, all the proper chemical ingredients to make life - with multiple exotic

additions - and most importantly of all, nearby planets that already possess life. And it would take but a meager twenty years of searching to find a perfect candidate.

She found a planet that was beautifully unformed, chaotic, and new. It was covered in boiling mineral-brine pools, glittering crystals that grew like forests, and black carbon rich soil carpeting the world like coarse dirt. But most importantly, not a cell yet existed on this planet; microscopic saboteurs were the last thing she needed to contend with whilst creating a body from beyond the veil. She could not enter physical space, but the Worthy are things of unfathomable power, even as spirits, and she yet held all the power of the Void's chosen.

Through the waxing tide at the edge of space she reached into the physical world, teasing thermal currents, coercing crystals to form unnatural lattices, and forging chemical bonds. One by one, bit by bit, cells with no forebear came together to form a membrane across one of the broiling pools on that nameless world. Crystal spires grew in converging arches above the waters, raising the sheet of fragile tissue up as they went. Within that perplexing mixture, crude cells began to crackle into shape from the primal broth by some unseen hand. For more than a thousand years this strange and unnatural incubation continued unabated. Year by year the membrane, and the pit, swelled, and bulged with strange fluids. And over ten millennia the very forces of nature were twisted and ravaged - forcing the land itself to bear a motherless womb.

What she would create would be a form like no other. She crafted DNA that knew no ancestry, and built for herself a flawless genetic line with timeless wisdom and immaculate skill. She tinkered with amino acids and protein bases, crafted organ systems, and mapped out a masterwork of biology befitting of her grandeur. Lipid bi-layers zipped shut, and her finely crafted genetic-code helixed into trillions of neatly compacted base pairs. Tissues, organs, limbs, all took shape in a fetal mass of flesh - and dreams of air lapping her skin began to drift through her formless mind.

One day as the crimson light rose beyond her placental shield, for the first time in billions of years, she felt something. Her nervous system neared completion and the lobes of her brain had begun taking firm shape, allowing her to finally leave the Void and come home, and for the first time she could truly feel. Even as an embryo, the feelings and sensations she perceived were to her old cellular-chemical signals what a masterwork painting would be to color swatches. She felt the flowing of proteins all

about her, the warmth of breaking and forming chemical bonds within her cells, the rhythmic beating of three hearts, and even the vibrations of wind buffeting against the hardened exterior of her womb. She was alive again.

There she incubated, year upon year, growing and shaping a body that was without flaw. Time and disease would not affect her flesh, she would scoff at the deadliest toxins, bend the most virulent plagues to her will, and be without the blights of hunger or thirst. Life had come to be in all its forms across the universe by random mutation and chance. Unbridled chaos had shaped life, and thus was its make inherently chaotic, and therefore flawed. But the DNA she held in her cells was authored, crafted with intelligence and intent in a body shaped by the infinitely knowing hands of a worthy.

Her little boiling rock made its tumbling pass about the sun more than three hundred times, but she had done it. From raw chemical soup she had made muscle, bone, and sinew, and assembled into a beautifully sculpted, yet meager, form. Iridescent crystalline growths sprouted from dry parchment flesh on her soft, skinny limbs - glowing a beautiful rosé in the viscous fluid of her self made mother.

The rolling booms and fiery shuffling that dominated the land was suddenly split with a wet, crackling pop. The sister cracked the shell of her “egg” and opened virgin eyes upon the fiery primeval hellscape she now called home - it was beautiful. A torrent of rich, acrid fluid poured out over her steaming shoulders, and slopped in a mess of afterbirth on the ebony stones. Her soft body slapped onto the hard surface and wriggled for the very first time beneath its own weight. Metallic ligaments pulled on diamond hard bones, and for the first time she felt the pull of gravity, the flow of blood through fresh veins, the true certainty of matter. It was all intoxicating.